



## Bridgewater Review

---

Volume 36 | Issue 2

Article 5

---

Nov-2017

# Percy Bysshe Shelley's *The Cenci* and the “Pernicious Mistake” of the Regency-era Melodrama

Derek Leuenberger

*Bridgewater State University*, [d1leuenberger@bridgew.edu](mailto:d1leuenberger@bridgew.edu)

---

### Recommended Citation

Leuenberger, Derek (2017). Percy Bysshe Shelley's *The Cenci* and the “Pernicious Mistake” of the Regency-era Melodrama. *Bridgewater Review*, 36(2), 9-12.  
Available at: [http://vc.bridgew.edu/br\\_rev/vol36/iss2/5](http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol36/iss2/5)

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

# Percy Bysshe Shelley's *The Cenci* and the “Pernicious Mistake” of the Regency-era Melodrama

Derek Leuenberger

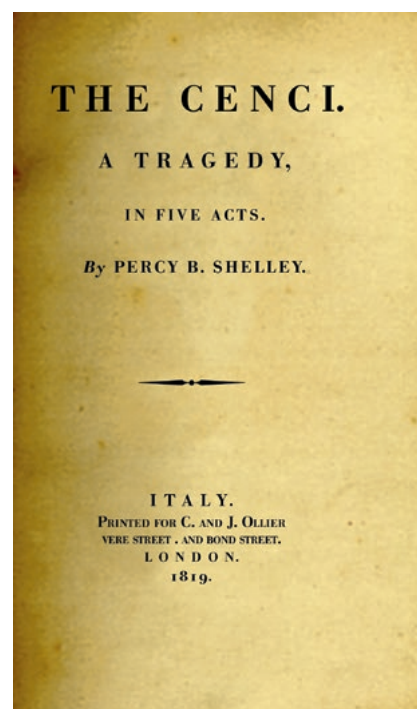
During the widespread social and economic tumult of late-18<sup>th</sup>- and early-19<sup>th</sup>-century Britain, popular markets for art and literature emerged quickly and had immense influence on the form, content, and style of the cultural genres they fueled. In the Romantic theater especially, the arrival of melodrama—plays with extravagant plots and physical action accompanied by songs and an orchestral backdrop—gave voice to millions of Britons displaced geographically, economically, and socially by decades of war, industrialization, and political repression. The melodrama was introduced to England in 1802 by Thomas Holcroft's *A Tale of Mystery*, initiating what Romanticism scholar Jeffrey Cox deems “a popular response to the excitement and anxiety generated as traditional social and cultural orders were challenged by the revolutions in America, France, and elsewhere” (47).

Melodrama—literally “drama with music”—provided a dispassionate description of the passionate stories of suffering and moral vindication that the lower classes of Britain told to themselves. Melodrama and its starkly divided moral world, emotionally-fraught dialogue, frequent violence, and raucous audiences became a potent channel for poor Britons to dramatize complaints against the government, mill owners and overseers, landlords, and other modern villains. In the context of disappearing economic bases in agriculture and domestic manufacturing in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century—the traditional mainstays of the British economy—and the altered social structures that accompanied these changes,

melodrama portrayed the victims of the new British world as alienated from the protections and justice afforded to the wealthy. On the stage, this sensibility drove toward a climactic moment of acclamation, in which the audience gave loud voice to its condemnation of the villain, hailed the exposure of his (nearly, but not always, “his”) crimes, and cheered the delivery of justice.

In a direct and literal sense, melodrama represented the fundamental exclusion of the lower orders from elite society: the patent theater system in England prohibited the exhibition of “serious” spoken drama in theaters other than the few—such as Covent Garden, Drury Lane, and the Haymarket—granted

license by the government. This positioned melodramatic performances outside the control of authorities, and elite observers of the time were quick to fret over the potential consequences of the form's rise to prominence. George Colman the Younger (1762–1836), Examiner of Plays during the reign of George IV, claimed in 1824 that melodrama espoused “the doctrine that government is Tyranny, that Revolt is Virtue, and that Rebels are Righteous” (quoted in M. Hays and A. Nikolopoulou, eds. *Melodrama* [1996], ix). In the chaotic years immediately following Waterloo, the radical writer Percy Shelley (1792–1822) might typically have used the same words in far



The *Cenci*, Title page of the first edition.

more approving tones, but Shelley, too, was alarmed by the intersection of melodrama's drive for retributive justice and its targeting of poor and working-class audiences. While Shelley had expressed conflicted views about the lower classes since his earliest forays into radical literature, his 1819 play *The Cenci* highlights his deep concerns about working-class melodrama and its moral and political effects. Specifically,

---

Shelley worried that melodrama's ability to ignite its audiences' passions and desire for vengeance was socially dangerous and morally suspect.

*The Cenci* is one of Shelley's most striking works, not merely because of its violence, but also because it contains some of his most striking depictions of social and political power, as well as genuinely tender portrayals of personal suffering that intensify the play's horrors. The play follows the destruction of the Cenci family in 16<sup>th</sup>-century Rome and, particularly, the tragic fall of its eldest daughter, Beatrice. Central to Shelley's critique of the working-class melodrama is the complex moral world that emerges out of a seemingly straightforward opposition of evil and innocence. The Cenci family is led by the sinister Count Cenci, tormentor of his second wife Lucretia, his sons

The legendary story of Beatrice's traumatic suffering and her revenge is the direct connection forged by Shelley with the dramatic world of working-class theater, especially its elements of gothic horror, which melodramas readily incorporated. Shelley's Dedication and Preface to the published version of the play states that "the drama which I now present to you is a sad reality," based on a manuscript that was "communicated" to him in Italy and "copied from the archives of the Cenci Palace at Rome" (R. Ingpen and W.E. Peck, eds, *Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, v.2 [1965], 67, 69). This move mirrors not only the purportedly historical horrors of the gothic novels from which the play borrows many of its structural characteristics, but also the true-crime bases of many melodramas. The debt to gothic fiction is clear: the preface to the first edition of Horace Walpole's *The*

recent events, indicating that the convention was still in practice during Shelley's day. He certainly would have been familiar with the conceit: Charles Brockden Brown, the American writer who was a favorite of both Percy Shelley and his wife, the famous gothic novelist Mary Shelley (1797-1851), suggests in the preface to *Wieland* (1798) that his readers may remember a notorious murder case on which his novel is based. For the gothic novelist, these kinds of prefatory declarations offer a kind of half-serious means of warding off accusations of a depraved imagination—an accusation with which the radical and atheist Percy Shelley was all too familiar—as well as offering an initial promise of exoticism and mystery to readers hungry for sensational characters and scandalous acts. Most significantly, though, these "found" manuscripts somehow, imaginatively, have worked their ways into English (or American) hands, and they augur terrible secrets that demand to be made public. Though the facts of Shelley's tragedy are to a broad extent historical, the play inhabits that twilight region between documented fact and centuries-old legend. Therefore, the story of *la Cenci* must be fitted, as Shelley says, "to the apprehensions of my countrymen in such language and action as would bring it home to their hearts" (70). For him, this uncovered history holds an essential kernel of public appeal, but it is one that must be deployed cautiously.

Shelley seeks from his audience a response of conflicted empathy with Beatrice's suffering and transformation, and not a unified condemnation. In her 1995 book, *Melodramatic Tactics*, University of Chicago scholar Elaine Hadley says that the melodramatic mode's theatrical polarization of scoundrel and hero, villain and victim, is an invitation for the audience to identify with the idealized victim (31-32). Hadley points to an important transformation in English theater in the way

---

Shelley says in the Preface to *The Cenci* that "Revenge, retaliation, atonement are pernicious mistakes," no less in drama than they are in real life.

---

Giacomo and Bernardo, and his daughter Beatrice. The Count is a remorseless villain, whose crimes against his family and others are detailed throughout the play, but the crux of the plot is the shocking rape of Beatrice by her father. Beatrice, with the help of her stepmother and Giacomo, later contracts the murder of Count Cenci. They are discovered by agents of the Pope, tortured, and sentenced to die. Shelley's interest lies primarily in the complex character of Beatrice, who in the course of carrying out and attempting to conceal the murder of her father, becomes victimizer as well as victim.

*Castle of Otranto* (1764), for instance, claims that "The following work was found in the library of an ancient Catholic family in the north of *England*. It was printed at *Naples*, in the black letter, in the year 1529" (v). Likewise, Anne Radcliffe's *The Italian* (1797) begins with the framing device of a medieval manuscript found by English tourists in Italy, William Beckford pretends to be the editor rather than the author of *Vathek* (1787), and Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer*, published one year after *The Cenci*, professes to base some episodes in





Percy Bysshe Shelley by Alfred Clint, after Amelia Curran, and Edward Ellerker Williams. Oil on canvas, circa 1829, based on a work of 1819. © National Portrait Gallery, London, UK.



Supposed Portrait of Beatrice Cenci by Guido Reni (Bologna 1575-1642). Oil on canvas, 1599. Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica di Roma, Palazzo Barberini.

audiences' sensibilities were implicated in the performance. Audiences claimed the long-standing "right" to voice their approval or disapproval of a play's aesthetic merits. In the Regency years, playwrights now sought to anticipate audiences' reactions, to harness their political voice and "bring out onto the stage, before the audience, that which had been recently rendered private and mysterious and to make it public and explicable again" (59). Thus, a vocal and participatory audience was essential to the melodrama's attempt to coalesce and collectivize popular political consciousness. The genre's means of doing so was exhibiting recognizable and "real" acts of violence, revelation, and just desserts. The desire and demand for these sorts of moral pronouncements, according to Simon Shepherd and Peter Womack in their 1996 cultural history, *English Drama*, created a peculiar expectation among audiences

for melodrama. As they worked toward climactic moments of the exhibition of guilt, they fed audiences' desire to know not so much "what's happened" as to express "what it already knows" (196).

Just two years before Shelley wrote *The Cenci* in Italy, workers in England had been outraged by the 1817 murder of a young woman named Mary Ashford, allegedly by the son of a wealthy landowner in Warwickshire. In his *Theatric Revolution* (2006), Georgian drama scholar David Worrall describes the furious reactions to the murder, including reams of popular "news" stories, pamphlets, and at least three separately authored melodramas: *The Murdered Maid*, *The Mysterious Murder*, and *Presumptive Guilt, or, the Fiery Ordeal* (318-19). These contemporary treatments defended or condemned either Ashford or her accused killer, Abraham Thornton, according to the sympathies

of the authors, but their key similarity was the insistence on a conclusive identification of a guilty agent. Thus, the bond to "sad reality" in melodrama was crucial to the radical and communal goals of working-class theater, which sought to clarify the baffling web of the causes of individual misery into a comprehensible target for class anger and action. Shelley, though, was particularly wary of the theatricalized wish-fulfillment of the melodrama, wherein the revelation of guilt is accompanied by satisfactory retribution.

In melodrama, the audience's judgment is not determined by the action on the stage but confirmed by it. This requires the vocal and public consensus of the audience through acclamation, which seeks to generate a stabilized and collectively experienced moral world. Shelley's depiction of Beatrice undercuts this process, however, by denying audiences any climactic moment of

---

*The Cenci* is one of Shelley's most striking works, not merely because of its violence, but also because it contains some of his most striking depictions of social and political power, as well as genuinely tender portrayals of personal suffering that intensify the play's horrors.

---

acclamation. This begins with Count Cenci's rape of Beatrice in Act II. The rape is never shown on stage. It is never explicitly named or described by anyone; no curtain drops over a portentous encounter. But Beatrice's agonized conversation with Lucretia, in which she refuses to name "the thing that I have suffered" (III.i.88), leaves little doubt about what has happened and who has done it. Shelley felt that he had made it clear enough, and he later wrote to his friend, Thomas Love Peacock, that his greatest concern was whether "such a thing as incest in this shape... would be admitted on the stage" (quoted in Ingpen and Peck, eds. *Complete Works*, v.10, 61). But the "delicacy," as Shelley calls it, with which he treats Beatrice's trauma refuses to bring the Count's crimes entirely into the public light.

Likewise, any satisfaction that Beatrice's revenge might afford is withheld from the audience's view. Count Cenci is murdered offstage by hired assassins, who initially refuse "to kill an old and sleeping man" (*The Cenci*, IV.iii.9) out of pity. After stopping Beatrice from carrying out the murder herself, the assassins finally kill Cenci, but the entire affair is bungled and pathetic: in trying to conceal the body, the

killers dump it out a window, and it gets hung up in a tree. It is eventually discovered by agents of the Pope, but Shelley never allows a cathartic display of Cenci's corpse. And after the arrest of the family and the killers, Beatrice turns on all who might reveal the plot. Again, though, Shelley denies the audience an easy shift to a new target. Threatened with torture, Beatrice argues that no one has the moral standing to judge her guilt, and her questions are pointedly directed at the audience:

Who stands here  
As my accuser? Ha! wilt thou  
be he,

Who art my judge? Accuser,  
witness, judge,

What, all in one? (V.ii.173-76)

The play ends with Beatrice and Lucretia awaiting execution, binding up one another's hair in a gesture of intimacy and mutual compassion that again denies the possibility of an acclamatory moment. Shelley's depiction of Beatrice as both sufferer and perpetrator undercuts the Manichean moral world of the melodrama and its collective judgment.

Shelley recognized the double-edged nature of revolutionary action with its capacity to spiral into a cycle of recrimination and revenge, as it did in the French Revolution, or to result in violent repression and retribution by government forces, as it did in British working-class revolts—the Pentrich Uprising of 1817, and the Peterloo Massacre of 1819, which had occurred only two months before the completion of *The Cenci*. These events, and others like them during the turbulent last years of the Regency, became rallying cries for workers' movements in Britain, and they were kept persistently before the public through popular art. Shelley says in the Preface to *The Cenci* that "Revenge, retaliation, atonement are pernicious mistakes" (71), no less in drama than they are in real life. For him, the "sad realities" of history must provoke a corrective reconsideration of the nature of justice and its dramatization. He insists that the play's moral tension resides in the "restless and anatomizing casuistry with which men seek the justification of Beatrice, yet feel that she has done what needs justification" (142). It is this humanizing of suffering and of guilt that Shelley believed could stop the responsive cycles of revolutionary violence and authoritarian repression that had stalled progress and happiness in his time.



Derek Leuenberger is Director of English Language Learning in the Minnock Institute for Global Engagement.